

BELPRES CHURCH

Yoked

Matthew 11:28-30

Speaker: Scott Dudley

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Well, great to have all of you here. Thank you to our kids, too, for being here. If you're visiting, this is a special Sunday. Our kids are in the services with us, as well as Baptism Sunday, which we'll talk about in a little bit.

One more game. One more game. I've been getting texts all week, "Scott, pray for the Mariners." And I don't know about the theology of that, but I also know that this afternoon, I'm going to sit in the exact same seat I was sitting in when Eugenio hit his Grand Slam. I'm going to sit in that same seat, so it's only weird if it doesn't work.

Every day, I eat the exact same thing for breakfast and for lunch. Every single day. Every day, I have a half a cup of All-Bran cereal. It's always the same. For breakfast, for lunch, always a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I order the exact same thing at my coffee shop every time—a dry cappuccino. They see me coming on the sidewalk and they just start to make it, right? But the other day, I was paying for the cappuccino and I said, "Oh, and how about a croissant?" And the whole staff went, "Whoa! Breaking free, living large." Yeah, that's me. Just rebellious.

It's also the point of this sermon series that we've been in about how Jesus unleashes us from whatever holds us back—from that bigger life that he wants to give us, that bigger life of adventure and meaning and courage and purpose and hope and joy. To break free from that and live a bigger life, live large. From whatever unleashes us—our addiction to comfort, worry, our hyper-control of every situation in our life, bad habits, sins, whatever it is—the busyness of our schedule, or just feeling stuck in a routine like me and my eating habits.

What holds you back from the life of adventure, purpose, courage, and joy that Jesus wants to give you? In the Bible, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul. My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

In other words, Jesus invites us to exchange our leashes for his yoke. Now, for those of us who aren't farmers, a yoke is a beam that joins two animals together, like oxen to pull a cart or a plow or something like that. And a while back, my sermon review team pointed out that there are some differences between a leash and a yoke.

So, for starters, a leash holds you back, but a yoke moves you forward. A few weeks ago, I told you that we used to have a dog, and when I'd go running with the dog, it would try to bite me because it didn't like the leash. The other thing it would do is it would race ahead of me, try to go ahead of me, right? And I would constantly be yanking it back, which may be why it didn't like the leash. It wanted to see new things, it wanted to smell new smells, right? But I kept yanking it back.

What keeps yanking you back? Holding you back? Maybe you feel God nudging you to take some kind of a risk that could lead to some exciting things in life, but comfort yanks you back or fear yanks you back. Maybe it's an addiction or a bad habit. Maybe it's anxiety or unforgiveness. Jesus says, take my yoke, because the purpose of the yoke is to go forward, not backward.

Second difference, on a leash, you're alone, but a yoke pairs you with Jesus to help you move forward and carry the load with you, which is why his yoke is easy. We are not alone in our struggles. Jesus is pulling the load with us, which makes that load lighter, and he does that in a variety of ways. Some of you have serious health issues, like cancer, or you're caring for a chronically ill loved one, and you've told me that there are times where you feel Jesus' presence in a supernatural way, and you just feel him giving you this infusion of courage and hope. That's Jesus helping us to carry the load.

There are times in our lives when we don't know what direction to go, and we get one of those thoughts that isn't our thought, and it's Jesus saying, "Go this way, go that way." That's Jesus helping us to carry the load. The purpose of a yoke is to make the work easier—easier to pull a cart with two animals rather than one. Jesus' yoke helps us carry the loads we carry, and get free of those loads, be unleashed from them.

And then a third difference between a leash and a yoke—and I'll admit this one is a little weird, but I couldn't get it out of my head all week long, so I'm just going to say it as a sermon point. The word "yoked" today in slang means a really muscular person, right? Like if you say, "Oh, that dude is yoked," like they're the guys in my gym that stand in front of the mirror flexing their big muscles, right? They're yoked.

So in other words, a leash makes you weak, but being yoked makes you strong. But not weight-room pretty-boy strong—that's just for show. No, no, no. Jesus, to use another slang term, makes you farm strong. And farm strong ain't for show.

Some of you may have heard me say before that back when I was in college, I took my then-girlfriend to visit my grandmother on her farm. At one point, we went out to the pasture to move some irrigation pipes. Only when I tried, I could barely lift them because they were so heavy. And so my 80-year-old grandmother said, "Oh, I'll do it." Shoved

me aside and picked it up like it was a feather or something, and just walked off with it. My girlfriend laughed for like 10 minutes. And I was like, "Well, I loosened it for her." Grandma was farm strong. Jesus makes us farm strong.

That sense of his presence that gives us courage, or he nudges us to be part of his rescue mission in some way—help the poor out of poverty, tutor kids who are struggling, help a refugee family, listen to people who are in painful situations so they know that they're not alone. And sometimes he may ask us to do hard things, but they also make us stronger people. And it gives us a sense of meaning and purpose to be part of healing his world.

See, Jesus doesn't just unleash us from stuff. He unleashes us for something—to partner with him, to wreck the devil's plans, and make it more on this earth as it is in his heaven. To live in a way that when you get up in the morning, Satan goes, "Oh no, she's up," or "He's up."

Back in September on Kickoff Sunday, I was walking up the stairs to go to the barbecue in the playground, and a man in his mid-30s was walking down the stairs, and he said, "There you are, I've been looking for you." He said, "I live in Kent, but I drove here to tell you that I got baptized."

He said that a long time ago, years ago, he was a student at Eastside Academy, the alternative high school that meets in our building. He said, "I ignored everything they said about Jesus back then. I just ignored it. Then I graduated, went on with my life, got a really good job, which I had for years, but then I got laid off. And I was climbing in my career, so it was really hard to lose that job. Then my mother died, and I got depressed. And I also realized that my life had been stuck in this same old routine. I'd go to work, and then I'd go out to parties. The people and the parties always changed, but the routine was still the same. Over and over—work, party, work, party."

"So I started reading some self-help books, because I was depressed. And then I started reading the Bible, and I realized that if there was anything good in the self-help books, it was in the Bible first. So then I just went straight to the source and read only the Bible. I started to think, I really like this Jesus guy. This Jesus guy is amazing. Then I started to remember all the things that people at Eastside Academy told me all those years ago about Jesus. And the things people at BelPres who mentored me told me about Jesus all those years ago started to come back. Sometimes I even drove here on a Sunday morning but stayed in the parking lot because I was worried what people might think if I went inside—but it felt good just to be so close to the church."

"Well, then one day, I got this overwhelming urge to go to a skateboard park—I'd never been to it before. And when I got there, there was a skateboard church that meets there, right at this skateboard park. I listened to them talk about Jesus, and Jesus made even more sense. So I started to go to this skateboard church. And then a friend of mine at the same time was really struggling, so I said, 'You should come to this skateboard church with me.' So he did, and the day he came, they were baptizing people, and he said, 'I'm going to get baptized. Do you want to get baptized?' And so I did—I got baptized."

"And my life has been really different. It's really changed. I'm healing from the grief of losing my mom. I got a new job, but instead of the work-then-party routine I was stuck in, now I'm mentoring some of these kids that are into skateboarding the way I am. I'm able to help them past their addiction issues, help them with the problems in their life. I get to be part of changing their lives, which is way more exciting than the monotonous routine I was stuck in of work, go party, work, go party. So I drove here from Kent because I wanted to tell you that all those things you all said about Jesus years ago—it mattered. It mattered. I ignored it at the time, but it came back when I needed it the most. And I really want you to know, and I really want this church to know."

See, years ago, Jesus spoke to him through some of you, and he ignored it, but it went in, and it was in there. And then Jesus guided him and nudged him to that skateboard church, and he got baptized, and he exchanged his leashes of grief and worry about being laid off, as well as a monotonous routine. He exchanged all of that for Jesus' yoke, who helped him move forward into a new life, shared the load of those painful things, and made him farm strong to change other people's lives.

And a turning point for him was baptism, which brings us to Baptism Sunday, which is all about exchanging our leashes for Jesus' yoke. Now, your story may be different than his. You may be a student. You may be retired. You may work in an office. But just like he did for this guy, Jesus wants to unleash you from what holds you back and call you to something bigger than the routines that we all get stuck in sometimes.

The symbolism of baptism echoes Jesus' death and resurrection—death on the cross, where he paid the price for our sins and was raised from the dead. We go under the water; our sins are cleansed; we come up new people. It also echoes the Old Testament book of Exodus, where the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, and Moses led them out. They came to the Red Sea, and the Egyptian army was coming after them, and God divided the Red Sea in two, and they walked through on dry ground. Then God closed the sea. They went into the sea as slaves; they came out the other side as the free people of God.

And baptism is an echo of that. It's a way of saying, "Jesus, I cannot get free without your power," because none of us can. So Lord, help me exchange my leashes for your yoke.

This is get-free day. This is get-unleashed day. This is Independence Day.

So if you've never been baptized, you can be today. And if you have been baptized, but God's doing a new thing in your life, or you know that you need Jesus' power to unleash you, then you can reaffirm your baptism today.

We have about 23 people signed up who will be baptized across our four services today. But actually, there's no one signed up for this service—but we are ready for you even if you didn't sign up. You can still come. We've got robes, we've got towels, we're ready for you. Every time we do this, we always have a couple of people come up afterward and say, "I almost went forward, but then I got nervous." Don't let that stop you. Freedom is too important to let that stop you.

We're just gonna ask, "Is Jesus your Lord and your Savior? Do you want to be his disciple? And over time, become like him, and over time, get set free from what holds you back?" Even if you didn't sign up, we're ready for you.

And the rest of us—we're part of this. If someone does come up this service to get baptized, we're gonna pray for them. We're gonna applaud them. But also, this is gonna be a time of extended worship. Throughout this whole sermon series, we've said Jesus sets us free in worship. So this is a time also for you to worship. There'll be people here to pray for you if you want prayer. We're just gonna set some time aside to worship Jesus because he is the one that sets us free.

Only a relationship with Jesus sets us free. Jesus does not say, "Come to my teachings." He does not say, "Come to my rules." He does not say, "Clean up your act, get your life together, and then you can come to me." He says, "Come to me, all you who are leashed by something," which is all of us, "and I will set you free."

Trade your sorrows for joy, discouragement for courage. Bring your dreams and your hopes, and find strength to live into them. If you're hurting or broken, shackled to routine, looking for adventure, have you come to the end of yourself and know that you need Jesus' power to go forward—Jesus is here.

Jesus is calling, so come to the altar. The Father's arms are open wide. Jesus, you are the liberator. You shatter every chain. You break every bond. You set us free.

So Lord, as we baptize people across these services today, as we right now enter into a time of worship, help us to engage with you. Help us not to just hear the words of the songs, but help them to speak to us, Lord, in a way that really starts to unbind us from whatever it is. We bring you all of those leashes—those bad habits that hold us back, our fears and our worries and our anxieties, our addiction to comfort, our risk aversion, our need to control everything. Lord, whatever it is that's holding us back from that bigger life, we bring them to you today and ask that you set us free as we worship you.

In your name, Lord. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What stands out in this passage?
- What do we learn about God, his character, what matters to him, his priorities?
- What do we learn about people or ourselves in particular?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What does Jesus mean by taking on his yoke? How does it lead to greater freedom?
- Where do you feel like you need to exchange a leash for Jesus' yoke?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.